

4-H Taking Charge: A Framework for Personal Empowerment

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Program of Distinction Category:

Organizational Strategies Categories

- Partnerships and Grants

Healthy Lifestyles Categories

- Health & Fitness

Sources of Funding that Support this Program: Grant funding of \$41,986 (24,986 for first year; additional \$17,000 for second year) was received from the State Partnership Community Block Grant program designated for prevention/early intervention programs through the Atlantic County Youth Services Commission.

Knowledge and Research Base

Diversion and prevention programs are needed to provide services to youth and their families to prevent juvenile offenders from becoming chronic offenders or progressively committing more serious crimes. Following OJJDP's Comprehensive Strategy, "Taking Charge" is a comprehensive prevention approach that focuses primarily on personal development and life skills, pro-social peer relations, school attachment, and healthy lifestyle choices. Healthy and nurturing families are a secondary focus area. The Social Development Strategy emphasized by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (1995) is the basis for a combination of interactive, experiential activities for both youth and families emphasizing life skills, healthy lifestyle choices, job/career exploration, and employability concepts. This strategy promotes positive approaches and opportunities for healthy social, physical, and mental development, as well as stressing healthy beliefs and clear standards for behavior in school, community, and family.

Needs Assessment

The Atlantic County Youth Services Commission determined that diversion programs were needed to provide services to first-time juvenile offenders and their families to prevent the youth from becoming chronic offenders or progressively committing crimes that are more serious. Over 33.5% of all property offenses in the county were juvenile arrests, and

juvenile commitment rates average 72.5% worse than the state average. Two municipalities – Atlantic City and Pleasantville – have alarming rates of high school dropouts and suspensions/expulsions from school, and the county has experienced a 12.1% increase in dropouts over the past two years. There exists a clear need to address these issues by providing positive alternatives which will keep youth in school and out of criminal behavior.

Goals and Objectives

The goal of “Taking Charge” is to provide intervention and prevention strategies for low-level juvenile offenders and their families by providing them with active learning experiences to teach personal development and life skills, character education, conflict resolution, and employability concepts – especially as related to success in school.

Quantifiable Goals

1. Recidivism of youth participants will be reduced by 85% for up to one year after completion.
2. Parenting skills of families/caregivers will improve by 50%.
3. 85% of all participants will increase personal development and life skill areas essential for success in life.
4. 75% of all youth participants will return to school or vocational training.

Objectives

Minor delinquent offenders assigned to “Taking Charge” will learn:

1. how to develop and apply critical thinking skills – reasoning, decision-making, and problem solving.
2. how to recognize personal strengths and weaknesses.
3. about drug and alcohol issues and how they relate to personal achievements.
4. how to set personal and work goals.
5. how to get along with, and work with, others.
6. the connection between staying in school and being successful.
7. what is an acceptable work ethic.
8. positive work attributes.
9. how to go about finding a job.

Targeted Audience

This program was created for first-time, low level juvenile offenders.

Program Design and Content

Type of Program

“4-H Taking Charge” is a prevention program that focuses primarily on empowering youth through enhancing personal development and life skills, pro-social peer relations, school attachment, and healthy lifestyles. This intensive program is a collaborative effort of the Atlantic County 4-H Youth Development Program and the New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission, the Family Court System and the South Jersey Juvenile Officers Association.

Methods used to deliver the program

The goal of "4-H Taking Charge" is to provide intervention and prevention strategies for low-level juvenile offenders and their families by offering them active learning experiences in the areas of personal development and life skills, character education, conflict resolution, and employability concepts – especially as related to success in school. First-time juvenile offenders are referred to the program by the local family court and juvenile probation officers. Over an eight week period, youth participants attend 16 two-hour sessions that provide a solid foundation of essential life skills.

Curricula and/or educational materials

The curriculum consists of a synthesis of lessons from a variety of youth development curricula, with an overall focus on enabling participants to identify their own goals, develop a sense of empowerment in attaining these goals, and ultimately be responsible for the decisions made in attempting to reach goals.

Partnerships/Collaborations

Susan L. Makres, 4-H Program Associate, provides lesson plan development for Character Education activities based on the Character Counts[®] program. Family Court, Juvenile Probation, and local police departments refer their clients to the Taking Charge program and also assist with follow up information regarding subsequent contact with the law and/or confirmation of school attendance. The Intergenerational Services of Atlantic County Government has provided senior volunteers in their programs to share their life experiences with the participants. The Drug and Alcohol Alliance provides the Fatal Vision activities on the effects of alcohol.

Program Evaluation

Process

Program evaluation included a pre/post evaluation based on the Penn State Life Skills Accomplishments Record format and focused on six life skills from the Iowa State Targeting Life Skills Model. Individual participants self-rated their level of life skills at the beginning and end of the program. Pre and post-test assessments indicated increases overall in the mean ratings of workplace/marketable skills, problem solving, and interpersonal skills, leadership, and self-awareness/worth.

Outcomes and Impacts

The program was implemented and evaluated as planned. As a result of the success of the first year (Groups 1, 2, and 3), an additional \$17,000 was granted to continue the program for another year (Group 4 and additional groups followed in 2004).

Table 1: RESULTS OF PRE/POST LIFE SKILLS RECORDS FOR GROUPS 1, 2, 3, and 4

LIFE SKILL AREA	Mean Ratings*		Mean Change	Individuals Showing Increased Ratings	
	PRE	POST		#	%
Anger Management/Conflict Resolution	2.25	2.64	0.39	18	64%
Leadership	2.82	3.17	0.35	14	50%
Self-Awareness/Worth	2.85	3.42	0.57	14	50%
Problem Solving	2.21	3.25	1.04	24	86%
Interpersonal Skills	2.35	3.17	0.82	22	79%
Workplace/ Marketable Skills	1.82	2.89	1.07	23	82%
n= 28 *Ratings Scale: 1 = None 2 = A Little 3 = Some 4 = A Lot					

Evaluation also included a follow-up with each graduate of the program to determine rates of enrollment in school and recidivism rates.

Table 2: EDUCATION AND RECIDIVISM FOLLOW-UP RATES AS OF AUGUST 2004

	3-Month Follow-up		6-Month Follow-up		9-Month Follow-up	
	% Enrolled in Education	% Re-offending	% Enrolled in Education	% Re-offending	% Enrolled in Education	% Re-offending
Group 1 May – July 2003 12 graduates	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%
Group 2 Sept – Oct 2003 6 graduates	100%	0%	87.5%	12.5%	87.5%	12.5%
Group 3 Dec 03 – Jan 2004 5 graduates	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%

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	% Enrolled in Education	% Re-offending	% Enrolled in Education	% Re-offending	% Enrolled in Education	% Re-offending
Group 4 March – April 2004 5 graduates	80%	20%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
AVERAGE All Groups 28 graduates	95%	5%	95.8%***	4.2%***	95.8%***	4.2%***
* 2 nd year program 6-month follow-up data available November 2004 ** 2 nd year program 9-month follow-up data available February 2005 *** Includes first year program groups 1-3 only (23 graduates)						

Twenty-eight (28) first time juvenile offenders completing the program gained the following skills:

- 86% increased problem solving skills
- 82% increased workplace/marketable skills
- 79% increased interpersonal skills
- 64% increased anger management/conflict resolution skills
- 50% increased leadership
- 50% increased self-awareness skills

Follow-up with graduates to determine rates of enrollment in school and recidivism rates showed that:

- **After 3 months**, 96.4% of all 28 graduates were still enrolled in school/accredited GED program and had no re-offense charges.
- **After 6 months**, follow-up with 23 graduates indicated that 95.7% were still enrolled and attending school and had not re-offended.
- **After 9 months**, the program was still averaging 95.7% enrollment in school/accredited program and re-offense rate (one out of 23 graduates re-offended).

Parent/guardian surveys indicated that 48% of parents/guardians improved discipline skills with their children and 36% have improved their communication skills as a result of participating in the program.

"4-H Taking Charge" has been identified as the primary method of reaching youth suspended/expelled in a \$1 million grant proposal submitted by the New Jersey Center for Character Education.

Communication to Stakeholders

Quarterly reports and an annual Monitoring and Review report were submitted to stakeholders. In addition, a written narrative including up to date pre/post ratings and follow up assessments were provided. The RCRE of Atlantic County Annual Report included information and impact, and a PowerPoint presentation for the annual stakeholders meeting included details.

Replication

"Taking Charge" sessions are valuable for a diverse range of audiences in a variety of settings for the development of basic life skills, personal development, career exploration, and character education. Some potential environments include after-school programs, other youth organizations (Boys and Girls Club, PAL), out-of-school Workforce Investment Board/ Youth Investment Council approved projects, and on-going 4-H club activities.

Program Sustainability

As a result of the success of the first year, an additional \$17,000 was granted to continue the program for FY 2005. A new partnership with the Title 1 Parent Resource Centers will provide facilities and staff to assist with implementing this program to their clientele in addition, or as a stand alone program, to the program funded for juvenile offenders.

Rationale and Importance of Program

The residents of Atlantic City, New Jersey face a myriad of problems including poverty, high unemployment, high crime, and drug/alcohol dependencies. There has been a disturbing increase in the percentage of poor families who are struggling to raise their young children. In Atlantic City the average family, regardless of race, has a median income of only \$31,997. 28% of families with children under the age of 5 and 21.6% of families with children under the age of 18 are below the poverty level. These families are unable to feed, clothe and house their children during the kids' most crucial years of growth and development. There is a significant 51% increase in the number of uninsured children from 1999 to 2003. Other alarming statistics include a 4% increase in the number of children living in families receiving welfare, 11% more children receive food stamp, the number of school-based incidents of substance abuse has increased from 10.1% to 12.3% while violence went up 2.3 percent from 1999-2000 school year to the 2002-2003 school year; and those for incidents of violence in general have increased to 67.6% from 61.2%.

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